

Painesville City Council debates water fee plans

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Since the topic was brought up in February, Painesville City Council members have debated the best way to finance a \$15 million water line replacement project.

On Monday, they seemed to be moving closer to agreeing.

Working with estimated figures provided by the city's finance department, Councilman Jim Fodor got the ball rolling by voicing favor for a flat fee based on customers' water meter size.

"It generates the dollar amount we're looking for and costs residents one fee and costs businesses another," Fodor said.

"Based on where we're at now and what we need, I think this, from what I figure, is the best option."

If enacted, customers could expect an additional infrastructure improvement fee, which would go solely to financing the necessary repairs, to appear on their monthly water bills.

Customers with 5/8-inch and 1-inch water meters, which city officials said constitutes virtually all residential customers, would pay an additional \$8 or \$9 per month, respectively.

Larger industrial customers' fees range from \$75 to \$175, depending on meter size.

Fodor, along with Council President Joe Hada and council members Paul Hach and Lori DiNallo also said they liked the idea.

While use-based percentage increases also have been considered, city leaders said they think they wouldn't generate enough revenue fast enough to get the replacement project started next year, as they had planned on.

According to city estimates, a flat fee would generate \$1.2 million in its first year, while the proposed use-based fee would take in

about \$776,000.

Not everyone seemed ready to vote for the legislation just yet.

Councilman Hal Warner said he preferred a smaller flat rate coupled with a use-based increase because it might be friendlier to city businesses.

Councilman Andrew Flock, who initially alerted council to the rusty water showing up in his constituents' homes, had his own idea.

"I've gone around and talked to some people," Flock said.

"What I think would work is charging 25 cents per thousand cubic feet of water used."

Hada asked city administrators to figure out how much revenue such a plan would generate, although Finance Director Andrew Unetic said there was "no way" it would be the kind of figures they were hoping for.

If council does approve the flat fee at its June 6 meeting, it won't be without some resistance from homeowners who say apartment-dwellers will get off easy.

"What I have a problem with is your definition of a resident," resident Ray Stern said.

"You run into issues with multi-residential dwellings where tenants will only pay a fraction of the increase."

However, officials countered, saying the plan is fair because it charges the fee to the complex owner, who is technically the water customer and who can then pass the difference onto his tenants if he or she should choose to do so.

Whatever plan they go with, council members agree on one thing — it needs to be approved soon so work can start on the decaying water system.

"For whatever reason this has been put off and put off," Fodor said. "We need to move on it now, that much is clear."

Video from the meeting at News-Herald.com